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AUTHOR Thomas, Grace Gilliard
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ABSTRACT

Fundamental aspects of the play behavior of kindergarten children are illustrated in five vignettes. Aspects include the function of smiles in play, sex differences in verbal and physical aggression, the simultaneous occurrence of flignt and fantasy in the play of boys, successful nonverbal participation in play, gender stereotypes, the sequencing of participation in different types of play over time, and play as a context providing opportunities for social interaction. Discussion is extended by brief summaries of related research. (RH)

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Babies, Dogs, Alligators, Fast Cars, and Dirty Socks: Just Another Day In Kindergarten

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Grace Gilliard Thomas, Ed.D.

301 S. Prospect Street

Crescent City, FL 32112

PS 019021

Kindergarten! What a great place to be five years of age and being allowed time to play. Boy and girls enjoying activites with no objectives in mind, just the spontaneous and voluntary engagement of the moment for pleasure.

This play can be filled with fantasy and nonsense. Laughter can accompany the performance as it unfolds in the child's mind and actions. The child's play can also be dramatic when it becomes symbolic to express fears and worries. A child can choose to deal with the emotions while actively playing make-believe or let fantasy and nonsense fill them with joy.

There has long been a battle about the value of play. The philosophy of a school can affect the type of kindergarten curriculum available to the child. The extent of this philosophy can range from a play school that encourages free play exclusively on one end of the spectrum, to a kindergarten where formal instruction is the only activity during the day.

But a child's play, just watch it and listen to it! What a joy to be able to get a glimpse of their smiles, their frowns, their glee, and their dialogues as they go busily about playing!

Vignette I

(Takes place in a kindergarten class during free play when activities are spontaneous.)

Tommy was holding a little toy policeman in the palm of his hand. He was mumbling to the policeman. A toy garage with an elevator was on the table in front of Tommy. He quickly shoves the policeman up to the

window in the elevator shaft.

"Oh, I got you!" he said, as the policeman came tumbling down. The policeman goes back to the little window.

"Boom, now I got you!" he said.

Tommy is in solitary play. He is totally unaware at this moment of the other children in the kindergarten classroom.

As Tommy turns the handle which makes the elevator go up and down, the bell on the toy garage is ringing away. Up runs Jimmy.

"Hey, I wanna play with car," Jimmy states.

"Okay, but don't touch the window!" warns Tommy with a smile.

"Vroom, vroom," goes Jimmy, as his car approaches the window. Jimmy can not resist. He touches the little garage window with his toy car and giggles.

"Boom!" yells Tommy. They both smile at each other and then laugh. In play the garage blew up. Jimmy drops the car. Tommy drops the policeman. Off they ran to the block area to start another adventure.

So much can be said with a smile at play time. A gesture can be seen as aggressive or threatening if used without a smile. If the same gesture is used with a smile or a laugh, it signals that the gesture is playful and nonthreatening (Garvey, 1977).

When Jimmy and Tommy dropped the toys, off they ran to start a new escapade. In Vivian Gussin Paley's book, Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner (Paley, 1984), she also notes that for kindergarten boys, fantasy and flight are synonymous. Running and leaping are what boys like best. She believes this makes them feel more distinctly the opposite

of the girls.

Vignette II

(Takes place in physical education class where rules of play exist.)

Kenny walks up the steps to go to the physical education class. He enters the room with the rest of his kindergarten class. His face lights up with a big smile.

"Something stinks!" he says. He begins to giggle while looking at John. John sees what Kenny sees. John begins to hold his nose and point.

"Stinky pooh, stinky pooh," he says. Others begin to chime in and giggle.

"Something stinks, poohie. Oh, dirty socks," giggles Susan.

The teacher explains that the pile of socks in the middle of the floor are to be used as balls. The socks are rolled up into a ball shape and taped to keep the round shape. (They are rather dirty.) Ms. Ferman and Mr. Ross, the teachers, begin to explain the rules of the game called "Sock It to Me." The boys and girls are going the throw the balls at the feet of the opposing team.

The girls' teams go first. Ms. Ferman yells, "Sock it to me!" The girls begin to throw the balls at each other's feet. The girls bend over to pick up the balls. They throw, using only their arms.

Susan picks up a sock ball and throws it at the other team. The ball hits Patsy on the leg. Susan claps her hand and giggles. A ball hits Susan. She squeels with delight while jumping around.

"Uh, oh, lost my sock," Susan mumbles. She grabs another. She throws again, using only her arm.

While the boys are waiting their turn to play, they are intently watching the girls play. They appear to be engrossed observing the girls play the game.

The boys play next. Mr. Ross yells, "Sock it to me!" Kenny grabs a sock, rears back and throws with all his might.

"Oh, missed!" he yells.

"Got it," Kenny says while grabbing another sock. The other boys are diving down on the floor while retrieving socks. They roll over and over like logs.

"You can't hit me, ha, ha," Kenny says laughing while falling on the floor.

The girls are standing on the side-line watching just as the boys had done. Suddenly all the girls are jumping up and down, clapping their hands, screaming, and giggling. Their hilarity was contagious.

The boys were really roughing it up, rolling, diving, grabbing, jumping, and yelling. Mr. Ross yells, "Freeze!" All the boys stop, knowing their turn is up.

"That was fun," laughed Kenny.

"Wasn't that fun, Kenny," said Brian.

"Just hit and hit and hit," chuckled Kenny.

The girls had another turn at the game. They appeared to listen to the instructions better.

Then the boys came out for another turn. They had to go back to the side-line and come back to the play area. They were too noisy and not following directions.

No doubt about it! The boys were more aggressive than the girls while planing "Sock It to Me." Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin conducted a comprehensive review in 1974 of research on sex stereotyping. One of the main characteristics gleaned from this study showed that boys tend to be more aggressive, both physically and verbally, than girls (Fischer & Lazerson, 1984). Just looking at the dialogue and actions of the boys and girls while in organized play during physical education, this is very apparent.

When the girls were on the side-line watching the boys play the game for the first time, the phenomenon called "group glee" occurred. Lawrence Sherman in 1975, did a study on this subject. He named the spontaneous eruption of mirth among children as "group glee". It manifests itself in children with a sudden wave of screams or giggles, and often involves jumping up and down, and hand-clapping. It appears to possess all the children at once or else it spreads like wildfire from one child to the next until the entire group is caught up in it (Garvey, 1977).

Vignette III

(Takes place in the home area in the kindergarten. It is complete with an equipped kitchen, trunk of clothes, table and chairs, and a baby bed full of dolls.)

Mandy walks up to the home area with Amy. "Let me put my sweater off," Mandy says while hanging up her sweater. Maria, a little Spanish girl, is already at the sink and stove. She is busy pretending to be washing dishes and cooking. She looks up and smiles at Amy and Mandy.

Mandy looks at the boys.

"If you want to stay, you got to put clothes on," says Mandy as she points to the trunk full of clothes.

"I be the daddy," says Chad.

"No, I want to be the daddy," says Randy.

Mandy points to Chad saying, "You be the daddy." She points to Randy saying, "You be my baby."

"Oh, no," laughs Randy, as he agrees to do so.

"I'll be the big sister," says Amy.

Chad puts on a big pair of shorts over his jeans in order to become the daddy. Randy starts crawling on the floor. Amy, now the big sister, grabs a doll.

"Bah, bah, goo, goo," says Randy while crawling like a baby. Mandy bends down to kiss Randy.

"Yuck," says Randy. "I'm going to be the dog," he promptly states as he begins to bark. He has now transformed into the family pet. He crawls over to Chad and barks. Now Chad, the father, is running off with Randy, the dog, chasing after him.

Amy, the big sister, is busy searching inside a large purse, while holding her doll. "It's okay, baby. Don't cry, baby. Sister will take care of you," coos Amy.

Daddy and the dog are still running around the room. Maria is still cooking a meal. Mommy is still changing clothes.

Chad, the daddy, runs back to the home area. He pretends to be asleep under the table.

Mandy, the mother, says to Chad, "I'll be ready in a minute, honey, then we can go out."

Daddy is still sleeping under the table. Amy, the sister, comes over with the baby doll, and announces to everyone, "Let's all go on a date!" Daddy jumps up just as the dog comes back.

"Come here to me, Sparks-de-go-go," says Chad, the daddy, laughing.

"Sparks-de-go-go?" laughs Randy as he repeats what Chad said.

They both laugh and say, "Sparks-de-go-go," at the same time.

The three girls pretend to get into a car and drive off. The boys look at each other.

"I'm a gator now," says Randy.

"Yeah, me to!" shouts Chad.

They start chasing the girls while announcing they are alligators. The girls scream and run to the teacher, Ms. Hayes.

"I want to be the mommy, but they are gators," says Mandy pointing to the boys.

"Well, don't run and they won't chase you," says Ms. Hayes as she frowns at the boys. The boys take off away from the home area.

The girls retreat to the play area. Maria, the Spanish girl, is cooking again. She has not spoken one word. She uses nonverbal communication with Mandy and Amy. Even though Maria was not communicating verbally, successful interaction was occuring. The children participating were mutually aware that they were playing. Catherine Garvey, in her book, Play, (Garvey, 1977) states that by the age of three, most children are aware whether they are playing or not, whether they are alone, or are engaged with another person. Even though Maria didn't speak to the girls, they were aware that they were playing together.

By the time boys and girls are five years of age, they tend to have very stereotyped ideas of what girls and women should do as opposed to what boys and men should do. A study done in 1980 by Eleanor Maccoby supports this theory (Fischer & Lazerson, 1984). Very seldom will five year old children play any role, except their own sex role.

Watching the girls and boys play in this home area, points out several facts from studies done in 1972 in England by Nicholas Blurton-Jones and Peter Smith and Kevin Connolly. The girls are attracted more to toys and other objects. They tend to talk more with each other. The boys tend to engage in more vigorous activities

with more noise and shouting. More close physical contact, like wrestling and tumbling, occurs with the boys (Garvey, 1977).

Vivian Gussin Paley, in her book Boys and Girls, (Paley, 1984) also feels girls are the sedentary players and the boys the more active players. One incident in her kindergarten class held her to the assumption that boys are more restless and disruptive than girls.

When Chad, the daddy, called Randy, the dog, Sparks-de-go-go, they found it very amusing. When children in play make up funny names for themselves or another person, real or imaginary, they are reflecting an awareness of the importance of the normal name and address system. When children are not playing, they insist on using correct names of objects, animals, and people. But at play time, nonsense syllables, nonname words, and terms that could be considered insulting, are used as themes for social play (Garvey, 1977).

Vignette IV

(Takes place in the carpet area of a kindergarten classroom, where puzzles, blocks, Lincoln Logs, cars, and trucks are kept.)

Seven boys are seated on the carpet stacking Lincoln Logs, blocks, and playing with puzzles.

"I beat you," says Craig, finishing his puzzle.

"I ain't racing," says Bill, still putting his puzzle together.

"Follow me!" yells Craig, grabbing a toy truck. Bill leaves his puzzle and grabs a car.

"Vroom, vroom, vroom," screams Craig, pushing his truck making it go faster and faster.

"Vroom, vroom, vroom," shrieks Bill, pushing his car and chasing Craig. They pretend to wreck the vehicles as the roll over on each other.

Ms. Hayes puts her finger to her lips, "Shhh!" she says, frowning at the boys.

The two boys start racing their vehicles again. With their boisterous play while rolling over and over, they knock down a house made of Lincoln Logs, that the other boys had made.

"Up!" states Ms. Hayes firmly. "Get in your chairs!"

No doubt about it. When it comes to rough and tumble play, it's usually made up of one sex, the male. In play, boys race about more and make more and shorter social contacts. When a new child enters into a kindergarten classroom, rough and tumble play is usually the last activity they engage in while becoming acquainted with the class (Garvey, 1977).

Vignette V

(Takes place in a kindergarten classroom at a table with a chalk board.)

Jason is sitting at a table holding a piece of chalk in one hand and an eraser in the other. He is drawing a house on the chalk board that is on the table. Seth approaches him.

"Can I sit with you?" Seth askes.

"Yeah, I'm making a house," states Jason.

"I make one, too," replied Seth.

"Is that a triangle?" Seth asks while pointing to Jason's house.

Jason nods yes. Then Jason writes the letter N and says, "What number is this?"

"Eight!" replies Seth. Jason nods no.

"Two?" asks Seth.

"No, two looks like this, Jason replies as he writes 2 on the board. They continue this dialogue, writing 2, 8, 5, and 3.

Cindy walks up, leans on the chalk board and announces that she wants to play at the chalkboard.

"There ain't enough room!" shouts Seth. Jason giggles. Cindy stomps away smiling with her head held high.

"Can I be your buddy?" Seth asks while looking at Jason.

"Yeah," replies Jason in response to the question. Then Jason looks intently at his hand covered in chalk dust.

Seth says, "I saw an owl this morning." He is just aimlessly scribbling on the chalk board. "I see him every night." Then the tone of his voice changes as he says, "I

wish my daddy.....I wish my daddy..... I wish my daddy....." He never completes the sentence to Jason. They begin to draw triangles, circles, and squares while asking each other the names of the shapes.

The girls are getting a big circle together to play Ring-Around-the-Roses. Seth looks at Jason and asks, "Do you wanna play Ring-Around-the-Roses?"

"Not with the girls," replies Jason. They both giggle.

"Let's play Ring-Around-the-Snake-and-Ants!" squeals Seth, in laughter.

"Yeah, let's play Ring-Around-the-Snake!" says Jason rather loudly. Other boys start making a little circle. They are hissing and laughing at the girls.

The school bell rings. Ms. Dawn, the teacher says, "Time to sit down boys and girls." The children moan as they find their way to their seats.

Seth wanted a buddy. No matter what play is, one of its main functions for boys and girls is to bring them together and to interact with each other. These play relationships give children a chance to practice social skills that will affect them their entire lives. For many years scientific studies on children's friendships were a topic that was neglected. Now, however, peer relationships from infancy to adulthood are being carried out (Skolnick, 1986).

When Seth was scribbling on the chalk board he was mumbling

something about his daddy. He repeated several times, "I wish my daddy....." Jean Piaget, well known for his theory of cognitive development of children, is in striking agreement with psychiatrists and clinical psychologists when it comes to make-believe play. During play, children can express their fears and worries and deal with them (Skolnick, 1986).

Howard Gardner (1982) has the following to say about play:

> Child's play clearly has its purposes: greater mastery of the world, more adequate coping with problems and fears, superior understanding of oneself and one's relationships to the world, an initial exploration of relations between reality and fantasy, an arena in which intuitive, semilogical forms of thought can be freely tested. Accordingly, by about the age of five and after several years of "serious" play, the child is on the verge of mastering the physical and symbolic worlds and has begun to find a niche in the social world.

Allow children time to play, then listen and watch. It will reveal the marvels and mysteries of children.

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